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SUBJECT: LIVELY MEDIA REACTION TO COMMENTS REGARDING  
"STALLED" DEMOCRATIZATION

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Local outlets reacted strongly to the October 6 publication of Ambassador Krajeski's remarks that "Yemen's progress [towards greater democracy] has stalled." Official and GPC-funded newspapers charged the USG with interference in Yemen's internal affairs and accused the Ambassador of acting like a "high commissioner." The Al-Ayyam interview sparked a discussion on Al-Jazeera's "Behind the News" program during which two Yemeni guests criticized the Ambassador's statement at length. End Summary.

2. (U) On October 2, Al-Ayyam, a liberal independent daily based in Aden (circulation: 35,000-40,000) interviewed Ambassador Krajeski. In the interview, published four days later, Ambassador Krajeski said: "Recently there has been concern in Washington that rather than continue along this ... very well-defined path toward greater democracy, ... Yemen's progress has stalled." The Ambassador added that while "Yemen has publicly chosen at the highest level to go down this road toward ... an expansion of freedoms, ... when journalists are harassed, when journalists are arrested, when newspapers are closed, yes, Washington is concerned." The interview was conducted in English and translated into Arabic. In publication, the article translated the word "stalled" as "tuwaqqaf," a term connoting a full-stop -- rather than a temporary setback.

3. (U) On October 8, the ROYG's Saba News Agency responded with a statement that "democracy in Yemen is a matter for the people of Yemen alone," and called the Ambassador's reported comments "interference in Yemen's domestic affairs," asking rhetorically whether he "wants a democracy similar to the one established by the coalition forces in Iraq?" Government and independent media outlets carried Saba's response. On October 9, official government daily Al-Thawra (circulation: 40,000) published an editorial entitled: "Our democracy is our business;" the editorial opined that the Ambassador's comments contradicted the views of the international community as a whole. A second opinion article in Al-Thawra stated: "It is not wise for some U.S. ambassadors to turn into high commissioners," and added, "This kind of approach will only bring more hatred and hostility to America's policies." Manbar Al-Shura (state-funded weekly) cited the Ambassador's remarks as confirmation of his suspicious links with the opposition Joint Meeting Party (JMP).

4. (U) Also on October 9, Al-Jazeera hosted a discussion on Ambassador Krajeski's comments. The program featured three Yemeni guests: Abdul Wali al-Shamiri, Yemen's Ambassador to Egypt; Abdul-Malik al-Mikhlaifi, a former leader of Yemen's Nasserist party; and Hassan Abu Talib, a Cairo-based academic and editor. Al-Shamiri and al-Mikhlaifi followed Al-Thawra's lead in accusing the Ambassador of "acting like a high commissioner." Al-Shamiri noted: "Yemeni forces have never been involved in the murder of journalists the way American forces have been in Iraq." Al-Mikhlaifi said that while opposition figures such as himself have many comments on Yemen's democratization process, the Ambassador's comments were intended to "blackmail the regime and the opposition alike." Abu Talib, however, generally supported the Ambassador's comments.

5. (U) On October 10, various media outlets across the political spectrum described the Al-Jazeera program. Al-Thawra added a second editorial describing the Ambassador's remarks as "unfortunate and provocative" and contrasting the remarks with other statements by USG officials' praising Yemen's democracy. Al-Motamer Net (GPC-owned news website) described the remarks as "irresponsible" and "disrespectful."

6. (U) The English-language daily Yemen Observer (circulation: 5,000) published online a second interview with Ambassador Krajeski late in the day on October 10 noting the subtle difference in meaning between the English-language comment and the Arabic translation, which appeared in the Al Ayyam. Faris Sanabani, who serves simultaneously

as publisher of the Yemen Observer and as Deputy Press Secretary to President Saleh, conducted the second

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interview. On October 11, Al-Thawra reported a similar clarification by the Ambassador: "I did not say that Yemen has halted its progress toward democracy, but rather that democracy in Yemen has slowed due to certain incidents involving the harassment and abuse of journalists." Al-Thawra further quoted the Ambassador as saying the USG "holds up [Yemen] as a model in the region."

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Had the Saba News Agency not flagged the Ambassador's comments so prominently, the Al-Ayyam interview likely would have raised no furor. The ROYG appears to have realized this soon after issuing its rebuff, and the conciliatory article by Sanabani's Yemen Observer on October 10 may reflect the regime's desire to put the hubbub surrounding the Ambassador's remarks to rest. This conclusion may be confirmed by the similar tenor of the October 11 Al-Thawra article. In view of President Saleh's scheduled visit to Washington, the ROYG has a significant interest in minimizing this sort of controversy. End comment.

KRAJESKI